

## Where are you Alex? Lessons to be learnt by Australians

*Michael Roberts*

Alex! Alex! Where art thou? We need you. Australia needs you. As a tale of ‘high drama’ and alleged ‘piracy’ surrounds the Wallenius Wilhelmsen and its detour to unload 67 male asylum-seekers at Christmas Island<sup>1</sup> hits the Australian headlines your experience and grandstanding would be beneficial to all sides. Recall how you bestrode the Australian media waves during the last quarter of 2009 after the *Jaya Lastari*, with its 256 Tamil asylum seekers, was impounded at Merak, off Java, and all of you attempted to blackmail your way to Australia! Now, in August 2012, as another collection of asylum-seekers rescued by the Wallenius Wilhelmsen have ‘threatened to harm themselves’ and secured a passage to Christmas Island, thereby raising Scott Morrison’s ire (on behalf of the Liberal Party and Australia at large),<sup>2</sup> your inside knowledge would be pretty handy.

Let these sarcastic opening lines in imaginary chat open up a serious question for the Australian media: Where, indeed, is Alex of the Merak stand-off? He was, after all, a celebrity courted by all and sundry. Together with “Little Brindha”, he appeared on Australian TV channels in October-November 2009 and stood prominent as a spokesman for the ‘persecuted’ Sri Lankan Tamils in search of succour and haven.

It was not till January 2010 that he quietly admitted to Stephen Fitzpatrick that the details of his personal biography which had been accepted in good faith were all lies. To state this, here and now, is to

lose a concluding punch-line for my essay. No matter: better for truth to out at outset.

## **The Story Step By Step**

The *Jaya Lastari* was a substantial cargo ship that had embarked from somewhere in Malaysia with its human cargo and headed for Australia, but was intercepted by the Indonesian Navy which had recently been persuaded to indulge in outsource operations for Australia. The *Jaya Lastari* was taken to the port of Merak but the Tamil asylum-seekers went on strike and refused to disembark.<sup>3</sup>

This was a major international incident. Australian media men highlighted the situation with striking photographs and many a sound bite. Significantly, several of the Tamil refugees were in touch with advisors, presumably from the Tamil diaspora in the West, by mobile phone – so it was not merely a lower-deck revolt.

Speaking in lucid English ‘Little Brindha’, aged around ten, spoke of struggles through jungle and pitched this appeal: ‘We are your children. Please think of us. Please. Please take us to your country. It's OK if it's not to Australia. It is better if any other country takes us.’

But it was “Alex” who stood most forthright. Speaking in a Canadian accent, he addressed Tom Allard of the *Sydney Morning Herald* thus in a news item filed on 16 October 2009:

Have a look at this picture you see today and ask yourself one question, (gesturing to the media and the bedraggled Tamils behind him, many staring in bewilderment) ... If you had no place, if you had no country of your own, what would you do? And how long would you stay in a boat before you were able to enter a country that will give you asylum?

The stance hit home: ‘It was powerful, raw and defiant’ concluded Allard, though noting that the demands would be ‘futile’.

There was no allusion to Alex’s Canadian accent in Allard’s commentary and he accepted the pseudonym ‘Alex’ as entirely reasonable and said: ‘His distress was palpable. Alex, an English teacher from Jaffna who had left behind his pregnant wife, choked on his words. “We are not animals. We are not dogs. We are not stray dogs. We are people without a country to live in.”’

Celebrities, however, cannot hide. In early November the Sri Lankan High Commissioner in Canberra claimed that Alex was Sanjeev Kuhendrarajah, a member of the Kannan gang in Toronto who had been deported from Canada [in 2002/03 as it turns out] and that he was part of a people smuggling chain in Chennai.

The second of these allegations remains unsubstantiated but the first has been confirmed (by Alex himself as we shall see) and is firmly printed in the Canadian deportation order of 12 November 2002. In any event, this revelation seems to have been the cue for his father (Chelliah Kuhendrarajah), his brother and then his mother to appear briefly on the news waves at various points in November and to provide some details of their biography.

The family had left Sri Lanka for England after the pogrom of July 1983. The parents seem to have separated at some point in the late 1980s and the mother and children settled in Toronto, while the father pursued his gold trading business in London. Sanjeev’s role in the gang scene, however, was sufficiently noteworthy for the Canadian authorities to revoke his rights and despatch him to Sri Lanka. This transfer would have occurred by early 2003 at the latest. However, Sanjeev seems to have moved to Chennai at some point after this.

It was only after his mother, identified as Sathia Rajaratnam, arrived that ‘Alex’ admitted that he had been a member of a gang in Toronto. Cleverly saying *mea culpa* and claiming youthful indiscretion, he nevertheless continued to insist that his wife and several children faced danger in Sri Lanka.

But his mother then let the cat out of the bag on 2 December 2009. She was a good mother. As a ‘businesswoman’ she was sufficiently endowed to travel to Merak to visit her son. There the two of them spoke to Stephen Fitzpatrick of *The Australian* who presented them through a captivating image of Alex squatting before Sathia, an attractive sari-clad woman. Ms Rajaratnam ‘said she felt guilty over his predicament, having urged him last year to move from Chennai in India - where he and his wife had a hotel business - to Sri Lanka, where business opportunities looked to be opening after the civil war.’ Sanjeeva, alias Alex, did not have a pregnant wife and she was not residing in Sri Lanka and one month later, on 4 January 2010, Alex ‘quietly admitted to me [that] he “made up stuff” about the fate of the downtrodden Tamil community,’ notes Fitzpatrick. By the beginning of March 2010 he went further - quietly slipping away and leaving another fluent English speaker to front up as spokesman.

This note was buried within the Fitzpatrick text however. There was, of course, no highlighting of Sanjeev Kuhendrarajah’s work of deception and the equally stark fact of comprehensive media gullibility extending across major Australian news enterprises.

The whole episode must surely enter into the annals of Australian journalism as a failure of scepticism and investigative technique. It is, on first impression, a tale of gullibility. Or, is it? It could also be a tale of culpability. As indicated earlier, it is possible that the editorial line favoured by *The Australian* discouraged any questioning caveats

because it was adhering to the horror stories about Sri Lanka pressed by *The Times* group in London and regularly recapitulated within *The Australian's* covers since early 2008. Stirring the public and selling news-as-commodity calls for sweeping generalizations and any attention to complexity and intricacy through caveats and detail simply spoils the grand plot.

The Australian media has also suffered from its profound ignorance of the migrant scene. It does not seem to have given weight to the presence of thousands of Sri Lankan Tamil refugees in Tamilnadu since 1983, presently numbering anything between 110-125,000. Again, till Amanda Hodge recently took note of Bernardo Brown's work, Aussie media circles appear to have been unaware that several thousand Sri Lankan males, mostly Sinhalese Catholic from the Negombo region, reached Italy by fishing trawler between 1990 and 2002 [till Italy took intelligent action to thwart the process]. What this fact does to the easy acceptance of the widespread theory that people will only get onto so-called 'leaky wooden boats' because they suffer from political discrimination and persecution cannot be addressed by Australians – cannot be addressed because ignorance is bliss.

### **Alex? Lost in Translation?**

Alex could tell the Australian media – and us – a lot more could he not! Only if asked appropriate probing questions of course. It is this outstanding failure that is highlighted by my story about Alex the con man. It is not an unfamiliar shortcoming. The lack of investigative acumen revealed by Allard and Fitzpatrick simply replicates the mind-boggling errors of omission displayed by Paul Maley and Drew Warne-Smith when they relayed the 'stories' presented by the Tamil nationalist engineer, Jegan Waran and the

jaundiced commentary of such individuals as David Feith and Bruce Haigh who pose as experts on Sri Lanka.

Today, Alex could also serve as a conduit towards revealing information from all those on the *Jaya Lastari* who are prepared to tell us more about his role in those crowded days on the ship at Merak. We know that Brindha and 86 others from that ship made it to Christmas Island from Java on another boat. They were clearly not short of cash, resourcefulness and connections. What decisions have been made about this body of people is hidden by the stone wall surrounding official Australian action (though it seems that Brindha and family have now been accepted as refugees subject to community detention). These refugees could be a mine of information. They could also aid us in building a fuller picture of Alex.

It is to Allard, Fitzpatrick et al that this essay is mainly addressed. Have they forgotten Alex? Is he an embarrassment? Why not pursue this fascinating character and get more details about his business in Chennai and how he lived from 2003 to 2009? He is a captive soul now, within reach for enterprising journeymen. It seems that he had hidden in Malaysia for quite a while, but was apprehended at Padangbesa on 29 April 2011 carrying a false Malaysian passport. He is in jail in Thailand<sup>4</sup> – unsung, uncelebrated, and hardly be-knighted.

<sup>1</sup> These men 'are understood to be ... from Pakistan or Afghanistan', Wilson, Lauren and Lanai Vasek, 'High-drama threats on high sea,' *The Australian*, 17 August 2012, <http://www.theaustralian.com.au/national-affairs/high-drama-threats-on-high-sea/story-fn59niix-1226452133048>.

<sup>2</sup> Morrison is the Shadow Minister for Immigration. He was quite adamant in his commentary on ABC News on 16 August 2012.

<sup>3</sup> The Australian commentators to a man and woman assumed that the people on board had fled the civil war situation in Sri Lanka recently, that is, in mid or late 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Information from Rohan Gunaratna in brief email.